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ABSTRACT

Students in a remedial composition course at St. Olaf College were required to write all their papers on a microcomputer. It was assumed that text editing would be useful not only in the writing and revision processes, but also in building both confidence and morale as students mastered its techniques. The assignments were explained on Monday, and Wednesday students were required to bring drafts to small groups for discussion. Later in the week they brought in revised drafts for individual conferences with the instructors, while the following Monday they turned in yet another revision. In addition, an hour of writing workshop time was required, during which instructors worked with students on specific problems indicated by earlier papers. One class period in the first week was spent introducing the students to the system. In an evaluation of the course, students reported that they used the computer for drafting papers and some even used it for prewriting. Two-thirds of the students were comfortable with the computer after the second paper. Most found the formatting and revision-enabling functions of the computer helpful, but fewer than half made much use of the computer's functions of moving chunks of text around or making global corrections. A comparison of drafts from five randomly selected students indicated that paragraph addition, deletion, and change were about as frequent as word/sentence revision. For most students, text editing proved to be a helpful tool. (HOD)

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BASIC WRITERS AND THE COMPUTER

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Abstract

This paper describes the process, reactions, and results of requiring text editing on a computer for a remedial freshman English course at St. Olaf College using primarily microcomputers.
The results were generally positive, especially in improvement of attitude toward writing, and extent of revision.
In addition, modifications of the process for using text editing in elementary or secondary schools
are suggested.

"As a musician approaches a keyboard and works at combining notes until the sound is right,so a writer can approach the computer and and through word processing work at combining words and developing ideas until they look right--and read right."

Marilyn Martin
"Word Processing, How Will It Shape the Student Writer?"
Classroom Computer News
3:2 (November/December 1962)74

My first contact with text editing on a computer was, truthfully, against my will. Writing and the teaching thereof was my major interest; machinery was not. However, since I was just beginning a new job at the Academic Support Center at St. Olaf, and my boss said I needed to learn text editing well enough to teach it, I doggedly learned first the Edit system on UNIX, a time-sharing system, then was converted to PIE, a cursor-oriented editor, on Heath 89's. The word "converted" is perhaps the key to my attitude. Unbridled enthusiasm is characteristic of converts. My enthusiasm has been tempered a bit by a year's personal experience as well as that of students, but only a bit. I have become convinced that the computer's text editing can indeed be a humane instrument in the writing teacher's theme song, "Revise, revise, revise."

The reason for this theme song, of course, is that for most of us revision is at the heart of writing. I mean particularly internal revision, as Donald Murray call it, when writers read and write drafts "to discover where their content, form, language, and voice have led them."<1> Often basic or remedial writers find that difficult in part because even they can't read their drafts. In addition sometimes the struggle to produce the

first draft has been so agonizing that another is unthinkable. Text editing appeared to me to be a splendid solution to both problems. Students could read the typed drafts readily, and with a few key strokes or simple commands could delete, add, move paragraphs, or correct a word misspelled throughout the paper. Revision simplified--the ideal motivator.

Several researchers are exploring the effect of word processing/text editing on revision. Richard Collier at Mount Royal College in Calgary, Alberta, tried to assess the difference between revision on a word processor/text editor and the traditional paper process. He worked with four first-year inexperienced writers using AES terminals over the course of six weeks. His results seemed to indicate little change in the actual nature of the revising strategies. However, he did note that the students entered into the revision process with the computer much more enthusiastically than when revising with the traditional method. He also noted that the text editing equipment itself, designed for highly sophisticated office work, was too complex and cumbersome for students.<2>

Lillian Bridwell at the University of Minnesota is doing much more extensive research in a three year project employing a more commonly used text editor, Wordstar, on Xerox microcomputers. She and her colleagues have developed two programs, one that yields "a time recording of the text and control keys the writer used to produce a text and one which enables (them) to do an 'instant replay' of the images the writer sees on the video screen."<3> Her conclusions will be

far more definitive than mine.

My observations are the result of more informal research. I taught a course in remedial composition this past semester, requiring all papers to be written on the Heathkit H89's, using PIE and its companion formatter, much like TEXT, refined to be compatible with our main system at St. Olaf. I chose that system for two reasons: first, the college computer center staff recommended and supported it; second, because it was simple. I did not want to add to the burden students already felt as they approached the task of writing. The fact that the editor and the formatter are separate may be an asset, because the students are not then constrained by concern for "the pretty page" on the screen as they write.

Students in this course, English 10, had been screened by admission data and an essay exam required after they arrived on campus. The classes were small (no larger than 16) but perhaps more heterogeneous than one might expect. Four of my students came from private high schools, several from small towns, some from well-respected suburban high schools. In most cases they lacked experience with writing and/or interest. In a post evaluation of the course, six of the thirteen responding reported little or no previous interest in the subject. Two-thirds of them had no experience with computers either. Several were quite hostile at being placed in English 10. One student was severely learning-disabled. My hypothesis was that learning text editing would be useful not only in the writing and revision process, but also in building both confidence and

morale as students mastered its techniques, even in this diverse group.

The course was structured by those of us teaching it to encourage a great deal of writing and revision. The assignments were explained on Monday. On Wednesday students were required to bring drafts to small groups for discussion. Later in the week they brought in revised drafts for individual conferences with the instructors. Students turned in yet another revision the following Monday. In addition, an hour of writing workshop time was required, during which we worked with students on specific problems lifted from earlier papers. It seemed to me that a text-editor would clearly provide an advantage for a situation that required so much revision. At least I hoped that students would perceive the situation that way.

I spent one class period in the first week introducing students to the double disk Heathkit system set up in our Science Center. A cluster of them could be linked to a high quality Necwriter printer and/or the main frame computer simply by moving plugs. Students were required to buy two disks and the necessary documentation. This hour of orientation was the only formal instruction I conducted in text editing.

I did work individually with one student whose anxieties overwhelmed him. He motivated me to produce a simplified introductory set of instructions for the first steps because the multiple page documents intimidated my students at first. This could be caused by a correlation between weak reading and writing skills in these students, but I have no definite

evidence of that. Laziness is another option. At any rate, two-thirds of the students came to appreciate the usefulness of the documentation according to the post course evaluation, but my simplified version did get some students started.

Four or five students quickly became the resident experts, important resources for the rest of the class. When one of them would tell me about trying a new technique using the computer such as the Search process or how to use the UNIX Spell program on his Heath programs, I'd ask that student to share briefly his knowledge with the other students at the end of class. We also dealt with questions and problems in those few minutes. This sharing of techniques and tricks is typical of computer users who seem to have a very efficient underground instructional system. In addition, the computer center also staffed the cluster of Heaths with consultants during the busiest times of day for more complicated problems.

While I cannot document this statistically, within the first two or three weeks I was convinced I could see a change in attitude for several students who had been initially quite angry about their placement in English 10. I don't think that it is coincidental that about that time they began to master text editing.

Having smugly theorized how text editing had changed students'lives, I decided to ask them how they felt in a course-end evaluation to which I've referred earlier. It inquired about the usefulness of various computer functions for students as well as about their writing process and revising in

particular. Fourteen students answered the survey.

First, the good news. Of course, all students reported that they used the computer for drafting papers, but four even used it for pre-writing. All but one student would recommend text editing to a friend, and all but two had shown one or more friends how to use it. Ten of the fourteen had used it for other classes, certainly evidence of a positive attitude toward text editing.

Two-thirds of the students answering the survey were comfortable with the computer after the second paper. In fact, five students said that they spent three-fourths of their writing time on the computer, rather than on paper. In terms of motivation, three students found the computer their strongest encouragement for revision rather than either their small groups or conferences with the instructor; three more indicated that it was a strong encouragement.

With regard to specific writing and revision practices, the responses were not quite as glowing, although still encouraging. Most found the formatting and revision-enabling functions of the computer helpful, but less than half made much use of the computer's functions of moving chunks of text around or making global corrections. (However, the cursor-oriented editor and the fact that the papers were short may have made these functions seem unnecessary.)

As I look forward to next year's group of English 10 students, I will plan some additional direct instruction about text editing, particularly on the intermediate level functions

available. If students don't need them for my papers, they will for other courses.

The results of requiring text editing were also interesting when I compared evaluations with one of my colleagues who taught English 10 with the same format, but without text editing. Her students reported that time was the major factor hindering revision about as often as mine. However, perhaps their time was spent differently. While these students revised about as often as mine (from three to five times), about a third of her students did admit that the thought of recopying did prevent them from revising extensively, at least sometimes. Her students also claimed that they revised primarily on the word and sentence level. This, of course, is just what we expect of basic writers since the studies of Mina Shaughnessy, Janet Emig, and Nancy Sommers.

I didn't ask my students about specific levels of revising, but instead examined the "paper trail," as Lillian Bridwell calls it, comparing drafts from five randomly selected students. Paragraph addition, deletion, and change was about as frequent as word/sentence revision. If my colleague's students' evaluation of their revision and my survey is accurate, we may have a significant difference, possibly attributable to the computer. While my students were as frustrated by the time constraints, they may have spent their time in more complex revisions. Truthfully, the attractiveness of revising can tempt writers to spend much more time at it than can be easily imagined by those who haven't tried it.

Since one of my primary motivations for assigning text editing was to encourage revision, I carefully scrutinized the evaluations of the three students who claimed to revise only one or two times on each paper.

While one of them had used the computer before, none of them made much use of the somewhat more complex computer functions such as moving texts around that would have made revision easier. The two students who hadn't used the computer before were an interesting contrast. Student A wasn't comfortable on the computer till three-fourths of the course was over, one of the last three students to feel comfortable. That same student did show text editing to a friend and used the computer for other classes, but was the only student who wouldn't recommend my requiring it next year! He was most encouraged to revise by the small groups and conferences with me; he was discouraged by lack of time and lack of knowledge how.

Although Student B hadn't used the computer before either, she was comfortable after the second paper, true of most of the students. She was one of three students who found the computer a stronger encouragement to revise than either small groups or conferences. Her major block to revision was lack of interest.

Student C who had used the computer was comfortable with our text editor after the first paper. However, the computer was not his strongest encouragement for revision. Small groups and conferences had more impact; however, he was also plagued by lack of interest.

Unfortunately, no clear generalizations leap out. For Student A, text editing may have actually been a hindrance, but for Student B it was a plus. For Student C, it seemed to be neutral. His comfort on the computer didn't inspire him to revise to the degree I had hoped.

Happily, for most students, text editing was a more helpful tool. Certainly their attitude toward it was largely positive. We have some indication that it may encourage revision, and it also appears that students revise more extensively when the computer can facilitate that. In a forum in Classroom Computer News Jonathan Choate comments that teachers of writing expect more from students who have computers available for text editing.<4> Perhaps we can assume they encourage more extensive revision. On the other hand, text editing doesn't save so much time that it is no longer a factor in decisions to revise.

If this system of encouraging students to use text-editing sounds too spartan for many secondary schools, Tim Riordan, in the same November/December Classroom Computer News suggests a more supportive system. He suggests it for elementary students, but it seemed readily modifiable to me. First he suggests training a group of peer tutors to work on the computers. Rather than having the students who could not type put the drafts on the computer, he recommends volunteers - parents, typing students in a class. Then he suggests scheduling twenty minute editing sessions for pairs of students, one writer and one trained peer editor. He plans to give them some direction, encouraging positive response ("What idea, line, or paragraph

did you like best?"), as well as suggestions to look for particular editing problems such as punctuation, or spelling. After the students work with those, Riordan also will make suggestions for revision. When the student makes that set of revisions, he signs up to get a print-out of his paper. Modifications of this general idea make text-editing possibile for students at nearly any level.

Text editing will not provide a panacea for the struggles of writing teachers. Basic writers will not automatically put more effort into revision because of it. Some of them will respond more to the computer's capabilities than others. However, learning its usefulness in a remedial composition course has benefits beyond those I anticipated. Computers promote precision since they are not tolerant of misplaced colons or commas, at least in the commands. Most importantly, students' self esteem can grow as they discover this powerful and humane tool for writing.

Endnotes

<1> Donald Murray, "Internal Revision: a Process of Discovery" Research on Composing, Points of Departure, ed. Charles R. Cooper, Lee Odell, NCTE, 1978.

<2> Richard M. Collier,"Text editors and the Revision Strategies of Inexperienced Writers," Paper presented at the Northwest Regional Conference on the Teaching of English in the Two Year College, 1982.

<3> Lillian Bridwell, Paula Reed Narcarrow, Donald Ross, "The Writing Process and the Writing Machine:Current Research on Word Processors Relevant to the Teaching of Composition," New Directions in Composition Research, ed. Richard Beach and Lillian Bridwell (New York: Guilford Press), in press, publication summer, 1983.

<4> Henry F. Olds, et. al "Word Processing, How Will It Shape the Student Writer," CCN Forum, Classroom Computer News 3:2 (November/December 1982)25.